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ABSTRACT

This user guide is part of a multimedia unit using an interdisciplinary approach with hands-on learning to motivate children to participate actively in their schools and local communities, and to experience the democratic process. This unit focuses on the concept of individual participation in the government. Unit parts include: (1) video preview; (2) suggestions for using the unit; (3) getting ready to view the video; (4) video modeling lesson; (5) follow-up activities for primary, intermediate, and upper grade children; and (6) a bibliography for children and teachers. (EH)

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For Grades K-6

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Available in English and Spanish

ED 404 263

What Is a Democracy?

User Guide

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My America: Building a Democracy

GOALS

To help children:

- become familiar with the democratic process and active citizenship,
- recognize what it means to be a citizen in a multicultural society,
- build skills in communications and cooperation,
- recognize how laws are made and how a single vote and voice matter, and
- experience how caring and commitment build community.

FORMAT

MY AMERICA is a 12-unit series, consisting of:

- 15-20 minute videos
- User Guides
- Resource Directory Disks (MS-DOS & MAC)

Materials were designed by educators, for educators. An interdisciplinary approach to hands-on learning is used.

EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

The MY AMERICA kits motivate children to participate actively in their schools and local communities, and to experience the democratic process. The series attempts to demystify the government, explain how laws are made, and show how American democracy is always evolving. MY AMERICA combines elements of traditional civics and social studies curricula with techniques and activities that encourage children to participate and become involved. **Its underlying theme is: Democracy works best when everyone participates.**

MY AMERICA teaches in the voices of children in a way that respects their intelligence and natural curiosity.

THE VIDEOS

Each tape contains on-location documentaries, animation and historical illustration. A classroom modeling lesson encourages children to use their skills in reading, writing, listening, painting, singing and performing. The cooperative learning model is central to each video.

"Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world: indeed it's the only thing that ever has."

—Margaret Mead

Videos are developed within the following framework:

Kid View: Children give thought-provoking, lively opinions on each topic.

Documentary: Historical context and current concerns are blended with examples of children making a difference in their communities. This section is rich in historical information and opens up a wide range of discovery possibilities.

Modeling Lesson: Educators and students develop an interdisciplinary activity designed to bring alive the educational objective of the video.

Wrap Up: The key concept is recapped from the diverse perspectives of both children and adults.

PAUSE POINTS

The videotapes can be used in a variety of ways. Some educators use the tapes to teach three separate lessons on a concept. To facilitate this usage, a blackboard icon comes up between the Kid View, the Documentary and the Modeling Lesson, giving educators appropriate PAUSE POINTS during which to elaborate on concepts.

THE USER GUIDES

Guides provide multiple learning experiences, lesson plans and bibliographies built around social studies and citizenship themes. Suggested activities are interdisciplinary in approach and focus on skills in communication and cooperation.

RESOURCE DIRECTORY DISKS (MS-DOS & MAC)

MY AMERICA Resource Directory Disks include black-lined master activity sheets, samples of letters to parents and organizations, petitions, proclamations and press releases—all of which can be customized. Also included are a listing of additional resources, bibliographic references for students and teachers, historical documents, and curriculum correlations.

This icon indicates that additional material is available on the MY AMERICA Resource Directory Disk.

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What Is a Democracy?

My America
Building a Democracy

Educational objective:

Democracy is based on participation. Voting is a powerful way to participate.

Student concept:

I am the government.

Video preview

Voting and participation are central to the American democracy. Children vividly describe what democracy means to them and how they have experienced it. We learn that governments make laws that determine what citizens are allowed to do as well as how one country gets along with other countries. Children see that Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln used words to bring the ideals of the democracy alive. How a representative democracy and a direct democracy function is explained. We see how women and African-Americans protested and petitioned for many years for the right to vote and for other basic freedoms. Children experience active citizenship by stuffing envelopes, writing petitions and phoning their representatives. A class discusses, debates and votes on getting involved with a local community issue.

"To me, democracy is people caring about their country and running it."

—Fifth Grader
New Mexico

"Voting makes me feel real happy."

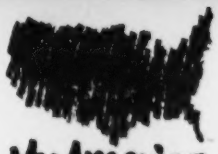
—Fourth Grader
Florida

Suggestions for using "What Is a Democracy?"

As an Opening and/or Culminating Experience to a Unit of Study: The video and suggested activities are designed to supplement your existing social studies curriculum. They are highly motivating resources to introduce and engage students in understanding that democracy works best when everyone participates.

As an Individual Lesson: Suggested activities provide experiences to help children understand that active citizens commit time and energy to build a democracy. Activities are divided into those appropriate for primary, intermediate and upper elementary school children.

As an Assembly Program: Have the children write down on a 3x5 index card their definition of a democracy along with their name. When the children come into the auditorium they place this card into a container. The teacher/facilitator randomly picks 10 cards and invites these children to read their definitions in front of the entire assembly. Introduce the video.



Building a Democracy

What Is a Democracy?

"When does democracy begin? Even very young children can begin to experience democratic principles through playing together."

—Susan Avino and
Grace Cohen
Modeling Teachers
Little Red Schoolhouse
New York City

Getting ready to view the video

One of the great ideals of a democracy is that everyone has the right to live, to be free and to pursue happiness. Over time people have protested, petitioned and gone to war to protect these basic human rights.

• Generate a list of adjectives on the board that the children use to describe a democracy. Divide them into small groups to brainstorm and write their own definition of democracy. Have them share their individual definitions with the class.

• Next, the children brainstorm and define what it means to have "a right to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Place their responses on the board. Ask the children to imagine how it would feel not to be free to eat in any restaurant, live in a beautiful part of their city, or vote for the leaders of their country. Children prepare and present short scenarios to highlight the strong emotions involved when you lose your basic human rights.

• Voting is key to a representative democracy. Give children an opportunity to vote on some issue before viewing *What Is a Democracy?* Perhaps vote for a class mascot, decide on a class trip or elect class leaders. Be sure to allow time for debate and discussion before the vote and time to talk about how it feels to win and how it feels to lose a vote.

Key vocabulary: democracy, government, majority, minority, representative, vote, laws, decision, discrimination, election, petition

Key phrases: "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", "all men are created equal", "majority rules", "minority rights", the Iroquois Great Law of Peace, "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people", " the greatest good for the the greatest number"

Video Modeling Lesson: Debating a Class Project

★Open discussion on how coming together to discuss social problems and possible solutions is at the heart of a democracy. Have the children talk about the issues they would like to take on as a class project. Encourage debate.

★Focus on what the children think needs to be changed or improved either in the school, the community or in the country-at-large. List all their ideas on the front board or on a chart during the brainstorming session.

★Generate a few ideas if they need help getting started. The children in the video lesson discuss their feelings about air and water pollution, endangered animal species, drugs, drunk drivers, tree conservation and planting, robbery and unfriendly people.

★Have a secret ballot vote on the list of issues they care about so that the children won't be influenced by each other. This can be accomplished by having the children close their eyes during the voting process. The two issues with the most votes become class projects.

★Break the children into groups in order for them to begin designing and writing action plans for the two chosen issues. Discussion and debate on what can be done begins with a commitment to get involved to do something positive either on a school, local or national level.

★Action plans should include a list of ideas like letter writing campaigns, petitions, marches, special events, and press releases along with resources needed and a timeline to get the projects developed and initiated.

★Enjoy the good feeling that comes from participating in a democracy! Share what you have learned with your family and friends.

Modeling Lesson Materials: chart paper, magic markers, paper, pencils

Follow-up activities for primary grade children

★An eleven year old girl wrote to President Lincoln and suggested he grow a beard because his face was too thin. He read her letter and accepted her suggestion. Ask the children to decide what they would like to write to the President about. Is there something they could suggest that would help him feel better? Is there something they would like him to do to help people who need support? See the MY AMERICA for a Write to the President Activity Sheet.

★ Open discussion on something the children think needs to be changed in school. Is it a lunchroom or playground rule? Should the school support a local person or organization that needs help? After discussion and debate, the children vote on the issue they would like to support. They write letters to the principal outlining what they want and why it is important. See the MY AMERICA for a sample letter.

★If the principal does not respond to letters, the children plan and write a petition to the principal. They make presentations to other classes explaining what they want to do. After discussion and debate, the other children are given the opportunity to sign the petition before it is delivered.

Follow-up activities for intermediate grade children

★A letter-writing campaign is a powerful tool to bring problems to the attention of government officials. Ask the children to think about an American social problem they would like to address. If they have no ideas, ask them to read the newspaper or a national news magazine with a parent, at home or at the local library. Next, give children an opportunity to discuss and debate current issues before they vote to select one. After the vote, children write to key officials and present their views, feelings and possible solutions. See the MY AMERICA for sample letters, and a Listing of Organizations and how to contact them.

★A petition is a written request that states a point of view held by many people. Individuals sign their name to a petition to show strong support for the idea. Bring the children into a circle around a chart. They have written individual letters on how to solve a social issue; now they write a petition that expresses how they jointly feel. After discussing what the petition should say and to whom it should be sent, the children write the petition together, and mail it. See the MY AMERICA for a sample petition activity sheet.

“By third grade, working through projects together makes democracy real. Formulating a plan of action gives the children a feeling that they can have control over their environment.”

—Susan Avino and Grace Cohen
Modeling Teachers
Little Red Schoolhouse
New York City

Find It In The MY AMERICA

The full text of:

- **Iroquois Great Law of Peace**
- **The Bill of Rights**
- **Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech**

My America
Building a Democracy

What Is a Democracy?

"Democracy is having the freedom to vote instead of one person says something and that's what goes."

—Fifth Grader
Minnesota

Follow-up activities for upper grade children

★Thomas Jefferson wrote that in a democracy everyone has the "right to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Our country has many sad stories about individuals and groups of people who have experienced discrimination. Children research who these people were, their stories and when they lived. Give time each day for children to report on what they find out and read books to each other about these people and their times.

Children read the local newspaper and a national news magazine, looking for stories of people who experience discrimination today. Have the children vote on whom they would like to help, as did the children in the video modeling lesson. They may decide to write a letter, petition a government official, organize a march or raise money. See the MY AMERICA for activity sheets.

★Some Native Americans' nations use a form of government called direct democracy. In these nations, everyone has a voice in making decisions about community life. Many Native Americans view life as a journey that is a circle or a wheel. Their Circle of Law, or Sacred Medicine Wheel, is used to determine the best solution to a problem or answer to a question. There are eight lodges or groups within the nation. Each lodge brings a question to open full discussion of the issue. See the MY AMERICA for an activity sheet that presents the questions of each lodge.

Have the children try using the Sacred Medicine Wheel approach to a problem in the class or school community. Patience is key to this form of democracy. Each person has the right to be heard and the problem is solved only when agreement or consensus is reached by all. Teach the children that taking the time to fully process a question helps maintain balance and harmony on any issue.

★Have the children look into the lives and times of Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Then, they create pictorial timelines of their lives emphasizing what they did to help America live up to its ideals.

The MY AMERICA Newsletter publishes active citizenship projects and activities. Send your photos, stories, and videotapes to:

MY AMERICA
Newsletter
c/o New Castle Communications
229 King Street
Chappaqua, NY 10514

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Check the MY AMERICA for additional books, resources and activity sheets.

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MY AMERICA:
LEARNING ABOUT
DEMOCRACY

USER GUIDES and DIRECTORY DISK

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MY AMERICA consists of the following program titles:

What Is a Flag?
A Pledge Is a Promise
Neighborhood and Community
Liberty and Justice
What Is an American?
The Story of the National Anthem
What Is a Democracy??
How Our Laws Are Made
Becoming an Active Citizen
Rights and Responsibilities

Teaching in a Multicultural Society (For Teachers)
Parents, Teachers and Community: Working Together (For Parents)

Resources available, AT NO CHARGE, when you purchase the entire multimedia series:
MY AMERICA Newsletter: published three times during the school year.
MY AMERICA Teacher Training Video: 10 classroom activities around civic issues.

"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."

—The Great Law of the Six Nations
Iroquois Confederacy

About New Castle Communications, Inc.
MY AMERICA is published by New Castle Communications, Inc. The company is creating educational materials in video, print and computer software formats. New Castle Communications is committed to designing, producing and distributing multimedia materials that engage children and inspire them to get involved in their classrooms, schools and communities.

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